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Deposited in DRO:

24 February 2015

Version of attached file:

Accepted Version

Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

Citation for published item:

Gregson, N. and Ferdous, R. (2015) 'Making space for ethical consumption in the South.', *Geoforum*, 67 . pp. 244-255.

Further information on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2015.02.009>

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Manuscript Number: GEOFORUM-D-14-00275R1

Title: Making space for ethical consumption in the South

Article Type: SI: Ethical Consumption

Section/Category: Full Length Article

Keywords: ethical consumption; Global South; middle classes; responsibility; mainstreaming; Bangladesh

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Abstract: This paper argues that, given the rapid growth in the middle classes across the Global South, debates about ethical consumption need to be reconfigured to admit these middle classes, not as a problem but as a possibility. It establishes the potential to constitute Southern consumption as a surface of mobilisation for ethical consumption and, through working from the specificities of the South in Bangladesh, demonstrates how within-South framings unsettle and challenge existing North-South understandings of ethical consumption. The paper makes three specific contributions. (1) It shows how North-South conceptual understandings of ethical consumption as political consumption might be reworked to admit the South. (2) Through an examination of the Rana Plaza disaster in Bangladesh it demonstrates the absence of a politics of consumer responsibility amongst the Bangladeshi middle classes, and suggests how a politics of responsibility might be forged, through paying attention to Southern brands and supply chains. (3) Through an examination of the Aarong retail brand of the corporate NGO BRAC, the paper shows that ethical consumption exists in Bangladesh, not as ethical consumption but as ordinary consumption with ethical effects. The paper concludes by considering the wider implications of these findings for furthering academic and practitioner debate.

Making space for ethical consumption in the South

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1: Introduction

This paper argues that ethical consumption needs to be rethought to admit Southern consumption, particularly the middle class consumers of the South. In so doing, it seeks to make space for, and to think critically about, the role of the Southern middle class consumer in a global politics of responsibility.

Our starting point is the rapid expansion since the 1990s of the middle classes outside the Global North. This phenomenon is documented in wider commentary as an effect of economic liberalisation, but it has also provided a new site for empirical research in consumption studies.

Here, recent work has shown the significance beyond the Global North of classic theorisations of consumption, notably Veblen on the connections between status and conspicuous consumption, and of Bourdieu's (1984) highly influential account of distinction and taste in cultures of consumption (Hanser, 2008, 2010; Gregson et al. 2010; Podoshen et al. 2011; Lin et al. 2013).

Related work has established the importance of safety and anxieties over provenance in Southern consumer cultures (see Yan, 2012; Gong & Jackson, 2013, on food safety; Yeh & Lama, 2013, on medicinal products).

As both Gregson et al. (2010) and Yeh & Lama (2013) have argued, work on consumer cultures beyond the Global North has significance beyond its contribution to consumption studies. It challenges a long-held identification in academic and practitioner literatures that sees consumption as the exclusive concern and activity of people living in the Global North. Studies of consumer cultures beyond the Global North pose trouble for the meta-theoretical framings that underpin much social scientific research, particularly political economy-based analyses of global commodity chains, global value chains and global production networks. In these highly influential accounts consumers are of the Global North, by virtue of their position at the apex of global value chains. In contrast, the economies of the Global South are characterised by export-led producers and production, be this in agriculture or manufacturing/assembly. There is little space in these accounts

for either consumption or consumers in the South. This situation is increasingly untenable on empirical grounds and important in furthering debate on ethical consumption, where a broad political economy-informed conceptual underpinning holds sway, based on Northern consumers and Southern producers.

The majority of research on ethical consumption continues to focus on production in distant places, bracketing consumers from its analysis. A smaller body of work addresses ethical consumption in the Global North. It has examined ethical retailing (Hughes et al. 2013), pointed to the importance of celebrity marketing in promoting Fair Trade products (Goodman, 2010), and positioned ethical consumption as political consumption, that is, as an effect of strategic interventions of key agents and intermediaries (Barnett et al. 2011). In all this work an imaginary of Northern consumers and Southern producers prevails, and in Barnett et al.'s work forms the basis for thinking ethical consumption through a politics of global responsibility. In this reading, the people of the Global South are positioned as objects of care-at-a-distance for subjects in the Global North. They are the objects of campaigns over labour rights and trade injustices, and are represented as the victims of environmental degradation. In such a way, responsibility in consumption becomes the exclusive responsibility of the Northern consumer. The unstated implication is an absence of responsibility for consumers in the South, for if the ethical is attached to export markets and the consumers of the North, it leaves untouched and written out Southern consumption, Southern consumers and their connection to notions of responsibility. Further, it leaves the door open to the suggestion that ethical consumption and ethical consumers are absent from the South.

It is this last possibility that we counter in this paper. After reviewing the literature on ethical consumption, its relation to wider debates on ethical trade, and establishing its location in a North-South (consumers – producers) imaginary, we turn to the work of Hilton (2005, 2007a, 2007b, 2009) to show how consumption has been shaped by agents and intermediaries working in the South (Section 2). Here, an emphasis on consumer rights in conditions of relative poverty has led to a

consumer politics focused on consumer protection and product safety. We argue that the rapid expansion of the middle classes across the Global South, when combined with consumer cultures grounded in status, distinction and conspicuous consumption, makes a rights-based approach to consumer politics in the South increasingly problematic. There is a need to make space in Southern consumer politics for consumer responsibilities as well, not least if Southern middle class consumers are to avoid charges of irresponsibility and reckless over-consumption and for the South to stake claims in a Northern-centric debate in which ethical consumption is increasingly being cast not only through trade injustices and labour rights but also through the lens of global sustainability.

As we show, the potential to work from Barnett et al.'s conceptualisation of ethical consumption to make space for the South is considerable. The force of this conceptualisation is in its potential to establish ethical consumption as a site for strategic intervention in the South. We tackle this in two ways. First, in Section 3, we examine the potential to extend accounts of ethical consumption to Southern brands. Our intention here is not just to counter an emphasis on Northern export markets by incorporating Southern brands in debates over labour conditions in the South but also to constitute a more complex surface of mobilisation of Southern manufacturing and assembly. We draw attention to the too stark separation drawn in the literature, and by activists, between (visible) export and (invisible) domestic manufacture, to the intricacies of Southern factories, which blur the lines between export and domestic manufacture, and to the potential for Southern consumers to become entangled in a wider, global politics of consumer responsibility. In Section 4 we take a different approach. Recognising that Section 3's tactic is an extension of Northern-centric understandings of ethical consumption and post-colonial arguments, which state the potential for notions of responsibility grounded in North-South understandings to be contested and refused (Noxolo et al., 2012), we take seriously the possibility that Southern consumers may refuse to accept the privilege, and attendant responsibilities, that a Northern-centric discourse of ethical consumption defines as coming with being a consumer. We consider the potential afforded by a different model of ethical consumption, in which ethicality is mainstreamed.

Notwithstanding the wider political canvas of Sections 3 and 4, it is imperative to recognise the South is not a homogeneous site from which to theorise ethical consumption. Its heterogeneity matters. With that in mind, the site for the paper's empirics is Bangladesh, a country whose position in global apparel manufacture and trade makes it an exemplar illustration of North-South ethical consumption. As we show, however, Bangladesh can be constituted as differing, and contradictory, surfaces of mobilisation for ethical consumption. In Section 3 we draw on Barnett et al.'s account to position ethical consumption as a site of strategic intervention in Bangladesh. We work from the 2013 Rana Plaza disaster, first to establish its representation through a North-South imaginary. Second, we consider Rana Plaza's representation within Bangladesh, highlighting the absence of a politics of consumer responsibility amongst the Bangladeshi middle classes. Third, working from publicly accessible data on the supply chains which connect apparel manufacturers, domestic retailers and retail brands, we sketch a politics of possibility in which Bangladesh's middle classes might be incorporated within a politics of responsibility in relation to clothing consumption. In Section 4, through an examination of the Aarong retail brand, we show that ethical consumption is a well-established facet of middle class consumption in Bangladesh. Aarong shows the mainstreaming of social enterprise in Bangladesh. The success of this retail brand is such that it has brought social development goals (women's empowerment and support for traditional craft and artisanal production) into the homes of the Bangladeshi middle classes, but as objects of desire not as goods expressive of ethicality.

Sections 3 and 4 unsettle North-South understandings of ethical consumption. Section 4 in particular poses trouble for these accounts, showing that ethical consumption exists in Bangladesh, as consumption with ethical effects. The poverty of North-South framings of ethical consumption is that they render such activity not just invisible but also unknowable. In that regard, a key aim of the paper is to show the difference it makes to the theorisation of ethical consumption to work from the South. A subsidiary aim is to work from somewhere like Bangladesh precisely to trouble Northern-centric understandings of Bangladesh.

To begin our analysis we make some preliminary remarks about Bangladesh's middle classes and their relation to consumer cultures. This is not the Bangladesh of a Northern imaginary, dominated as this is by the legacy of being labelled the 'basket-case' failed state of South Asia (Lewis, 2011), by poverty-reduction development programmes and by a future threatened by climate change.¹

Bangladesh-based analysts have emphasised the importance of the middle class as a means to move away from the country's traditional reliance on global export markets, advocating domestic growth strategies based on urban, middle class consumers (Barkat, 2012). Yet, there is a dearth of research on the Bangladesh middle class. Vernacular accounts point to its origins in the pre-colonial upper castes of Bengal and then in the British colonial period and the state-controlled industries of East Pakistan, before highlighting a new middle class consequent upon economic liberalisation, private sector growth, international migration and remittances.² Published work has begun to flesh out the details. van Schendel (2009 pp 152 – 88)) draws attention to a post-Liberation elite, for whom the Bengali language and shared cultural symbols (of land, landscape, rurality and village life) were critical to maintaining connections to a rural population from whom they were increasingly distant, physically and economically. Lewis (2011) identifies a new middle class that has emerged since the 1990s, heavily influenced by experiences in the Gulf States, and more Islamic-leaning in their understanding of Bangladeshi identity. In contrast, Mapril (2014) highlights the importance of international migration in securing middle class status for Bangladeshis and argues that the current labour market in Bangladesh is such that to remain is to risk losing middle class status: there are insufficient jobs for those who see themselves as middle class. This situation accords with the uncertainties documented in relation to the Indian middle classes (Jeffrey et al., 2008). Mapril's

¹ Web of Science searches on Bangladesh show a country whose place in academic knowledge is defined by poverty-reduction development programmes, flood risk and climate change adaptation. Other work has appeared recently on domestic violence, arsenic poisoning, recycling industries, and the Bangladeshi middle class diaspora. This complicates, but has yet to disrupt, prevailing representations of the country.

² They highlight the heterogeneity of the Bangladeshi middle class, the range of employment and the diversification of middle class identities. An old caste-based Bengali middle class defined by *Bhaddrolok* (self-distinguishing refinement) has been supplanted by a professional middle class with a basis in education and skills and by an entrepreneurial new middle class. It is further complicated by growing conflicting tendencies between Islamic values and a new cosmopolitanism, defined in terms of secularism, openness to western, liberal values in relation to gender and sexuality, and expressed through lifestyle and consumption.

analysis identifies the new, affluent Bangladeshi middle class as a Weberian status group; as heterogeneous, as both urban and rural, as disassociating themselves from, and devaluing of, manual labour, as making significant investments in education and English, and as relatively wealthy.³ These characteristics, particularly the emphasis on status, matter profoundly in shaping emerging consumer cultures.

The importance of consumption for Bangladesh's rapidly growing, youthful, and largely urban middle class is obvious from an explosion in key signifiers and conveyers of consumer culture: lifestyle TV programmes, magazines, advertising. Stuff matters, and a vast amount of space has been afforded to lifestyle and shopping in the Bangladeshi media since the mid-2000s. This is attracting wider comment within the Southern media, where Bangladesh's consumption is a new story. A 2011 *Al Jazeera* report highlighted the 30 million people in the country's middle income bracket and drew attention to 100,000/day footfall rates in city malls⁴, the boom in new Japanese car imports, and the importance of the latest clothing for middle class women to 'stand out from the crowd'. Academic research is beginning to document the same phenomenon. Textile and fashion researchers have highlighted that the malls of the capital city Dhaka and major cities Chittagong and Sylhet are home to new domestic fashion brands in the ready-to-wear sector, selling international and fusion Asian styles, for men as well as women, including Cat's Eye, Yellow, Westec, Artisti, Aarong and Estacy (Islam et al., 2014). This work shows the importance of style and price in consumer's brand differentiation. Other research on emerging consumer cultures shows the importance of status and taste as a marker of distinction in the consumption of home furniture and furnishings, with brand, style and price closely mapped onto the key distinctions drawn in popular culture between the

³ Journalist accounts point to a paucity of data but evidence a-plenty for the growth in the Bangladesh middle class. They state a doubling of middle class income (2003-2013) and highlight World Bank estimates of \$100bn per annum spent on private consumption (Mohiuddin, 2014).

⁴ High profile examples include Bashundhara City, Pink City (Gulshan) and Jamuna Future Park, all in Dhaka. Bashundhara City is widely cited as the largest shopping and recreation complex in South Asia. It covers 19 storeys and contains ~2500 retail units plus associated gyms, games and gaming rooms, and a multiplex global cinema chain.

lower, middle and upper middle class (Gregson et al. 2010). This work affirms Rozario's (2006) research on veiling amongst educated middle class Bangladeshi women, which highlighted the importance of clothing and modes of dress in enabling middle class women to maintain social distance from lower class, poor women.

Bangladesh's emerging consumer cultures are ones in which conspicuous consumption confers status for the middle classes and where the world of goods connotes, and is used to convey, social differences. For ethical consumption to become a surface of mobilisation in Bangladesh it must recognise that consumption is about social distinction, acknowledge the relationship of goods to maintaining social distance, and see the connections of both to a particular, keenly differentiated, highly granulated, yet uncertain and distinctly South Asian mode of being middle class. This is not a terrain onto which Northern-centric notions of responsibility can be imposed.

We close the paper in Section 5, by articulating the wider implications of our arguments for academic and practitioner debate on ethical consumption.

2: Thinking ethical consumption South

In the literature on ethical production and consumption the term ethical attaches to commodities (Mutersbaugh & Lyon, 2012), specifically products (chiefly agricultural and handicrafts) produced in the South and marketed in the Global North to consumers as ethically produced and/or traded. The label 'ethical' is underscored by certified standards for producers (and their products), whose effect is to produce and guarantee products and people through relations deemed ethical. These interventions are framed typically through alternative trade (particularly Fair Trade) and challenge the inequities of global capitalism. A large literature documents the effects and efficacy of certification and accreditation schemes on producers in the South, focusing on agricultural products (e.g. Mutersbaugh, 2002; Renard, 2005; Mutersbaugh et al. 2005; Guthman, 2007; Ponte, 2008; McEwan & Bek, 2009; Bassett, 2010; Reynolds et al. 2010; Marston, 2013). A second line of enquiry

examines the effects of 'mainstreaming' on ethical producers (e.g. Freidberg, 2003, 2004; Low & Davenport, 2005; Reynolds, 2009; Doherty et al. 2013; Hughes et al. 2013). Whilst the majority of contributions continue to identify ethical with ethical production, and position their accounts within commodity chain analyses, others consider the consumption of ethical commodities by consumers living in the Global North (e.g. Varul, 2009; Adams & Raisborough 2010; Andorfer & Liebe, 2012; Andorfer, 2013). The prevailing paradigms here are of consumption studies.

A core distinction in work on ethical consumption is between accounts that emphasise the ethical consumer (Harrison et al. 2005; Newholm & Shaw, 2007) and those which frame ethicality either through consumption as practised or as political consumption (Clarke et al., 2007) within a wider politics of globalizing responsibilities (Young, 2004). In the former canon of work, the consumer is cast in the role of 'the saviour whose power to promote development the world over has become paramount' (Goodman, 2010, p 105). Acts of purchase (or boycotts and buycotts), and purchasing ethical commodities, become the responsibility of the consumer, who becomes ethical through making these purchases and not others. This work contrasts with research which positions ethics within everyday consumption practices (Adams & Raisborough, 2010; Johnson et al. 2011).

Consumers' ambivalences and scepticism over ethical goods moves analysts to emphasise morals (care and responsibility) over ethics, and to align with Miller's (2001) argument that people are more likely to demonstrate care in relations of intimacy and social proximity than they are towards distant strangers.

In contrast, Barnett et al. (2011) position ethical consumption as political consumption. They draw on Foucauldian thinking to frame ethical consumption not as the acts of purchase of individualised consumers but as the contingent effect of key agents and intermediaries, as individualised collective action. Their focus is on the campaigns and organisations which generate information and cultural repertoires which allow people to bring care-at-a-distance and a global sense of responsibility into ordinary practices such as food and clothes shopping or doing the laundry. For Barnett et al., the

figure of the ethical consumer is not prior to or one which exists in individual ethical consumers, but rather is mobilised and encountered in the course of everyday life. In that respect, Barnett et al. join with research which emphasises ethicality as part of consumption practices. Where they depart from this work is in highlighting the political subject position of citizenship and responsibility that is brought into being through the resources and narratives made available to consumers through ethical consumer guides, blogs and magazines, as well as established movements and campaigns associated with trade justice and labour rights, such as Fair Trade. In such a way everyday consumption practices become more than domestic and social and open to a wider sense of the political. Further, they argue that documenting and reporting ethical actions works to mobilise the figure of the ethical consumer as a position for campaigning organisations to speak from and for in the public sphere.

There is much that we find persuasive in this argument, particularly the move from the ethical consumer to ethics located in consumption as practice, the emphasis on the contingency of ethical consumption, and the importance of the figure of the ethical consumer as a position to speak from and for. Nonetheless, a blind spot in Barnett et al.'s analysis is that it continues to universalise the consumer living in the Global North. More strongly, when they combine their analysis with a politics of responsibility based in the work of Young (2004), Barnett et al. overlook that an effect of these key intermediaries shaping of care-at-a-distance is that this becomes the exclusive responsibility of Northern consumers. Precisely because they have been forged as a critique of global trade and its inequities, these campaigns and organisations assume the subject position of the consumer to be that of a Northern consumer. Correspondingly, the figure of the ethical consumer is mobilised exclusively in the public sphere of the Global North. Confirmation of this reading is provided by Andorfer & Liebe's (2012) review of research on Fair Trade consumption, in which the majority of publications focus on either North American or UK-based consumers alongside a smattering of other studies, all of them located in the Global North.

This is not to deny the responsibilities of Northern consumers – far from it. Neither is it to deny the importance of the politics of consumption in the Global North, but it is to highlight the figure that is omitted, and rendered invisible by, this analysis: the middle class consumer of the South. Against a backdrop that positions people of the South as the objects of care-at-a-distance, and the victims of the inequities of global trade, there is currently no space in the politics of ethical consumption for the rapidly expanding ranks of middle class consumers in the South. In the face of the growth of the middle classes in the South since the late 1990s, this situation is not only no longer tenable but also problematic for furthering political and academic debates about ethical consumption. Rising levels of consumption outside the Global North will connect all too easily with glib arguments which equate consumption with a rampant consumerism and which see consumers as self-centred dupes. Such representations have been challenged in consumption studies (Miller, 1995), with an unacknowledged focus on Northern consumers, and there is a need for parallel work on Southern consumers. This work is starting to emerge but needs to connect to debate on ethical consumption in the South. An argument reported by Low & Davenport (2007) is instructive here. They quote an ex-Director of an Indian Fair Trade Organisation as stating: “while Southern producers and workers have played a key role in promoting ‘trade not aid’, the idea of being an ethical consumer (...) has little resonance with Southern consumers such as the growing Indian middle class” (p 341). This argument recites debates on the decline in social responsibility amongst the Indian middle classes and their growing amnesia in relation to poverty (Kothari, 1993; Varma, 1998), and relates to the rise of new consumer cultures linked to economic liberalisation (Fernandes, 2000). However, it also identifies ethical consumption’s absence as a behavioural attribute of Indian, and by inference Southern, consumers. Not only is this to restate ethical consumption as an orientation of individual consumers, it also has the effect of homogenising southern consumers as unethical and irresponsible and, in such a way, continues to insist that the responsibility for living responsibly in a global world is that of Northern consumers. It is this position that we seek to counter in the remainder of the paper, by working from the South.

We begin by examining how consumption has been framed as political consumption by agents and intermediaries in the South. Hilton's work is critical here (Hilton, 2005, 2007a, 2007b, 2009).

Through a series of publications examining the International Organisation of Consumers' Union (IOCU), Consumers International (CI) and the influential CI-affiliated body, the Consumers' Association of Penang, Hilton has shown how the concerns of consumers in the South have been mobilised by consumer associations to articulate a distinctive body of consumer rights across the Global South, focused on product safety and fair prices. The focus on consumer protection here differs markedly from consumer rights in the Global North, where the emphasis is on comparative product testing, consumer choice and an individualised consumer (Hilton 2005). In the South the concerns of vulnerable, poor consumers (Hossein et al. 2008), particularly rights to the safety of ingested products and fair prices in relation to key dietary staples, figure centrally. Consumer associations have campaigned on breast milk substitution, tobacco, adulterated foods and food safety, pesticide use and pharmaceutical products and their safety. They have monitored the price of basic staples, raised consumer awareness of product safety through education and information programmes, and advocated and lobbied for consumer protection legislation and/or its enforcement.

The work of NGOs affiliated to Consumers International indicates the significance of consumption as a site of mobilisation within civil society in the South. Consumer associations have mobilised to demand effective state regulation, and to challenge endemic business negligence and malpractice. They have insisted on a collective responsibility for all people, but particularly the poorest groups who are most vulnerable to cheap, adulterated and/or contaminated goods. Parallels can therefore be drawn between historical research on consumer activism in the US and Northern Europe (Daunton & Hilton, 2001; Hilton, 2003) and the current consumer politics of the South. The question this raises for debate on ethical consumption, however, is how a consumer politics in the South grounded in consumer protection might interface with current Northern-centric notions of ethical

consumption rooted in consumer responsibility. What space is there here for the figure of the ethical consumer to be mobilised?

At the heart of this issue is the question of responsibility and its relation to the middle classes of the South. In a consumer politics focused on the rights that accompany consumer protection, responsibilities are often overlooked (Hilton, 2005; Barnett et al. 2011). It is this absence which ethical consumption in the North has worked off. However, this manoeuvre is inseparable from broader political tendencies in the North, notably the trend to individualised collective action, which connects with the rise of the consumer society and wider debates about citizenship, participation and the rolling back of the state under neo-liberalism (Pattie et al. 2003). Further, in the Global North the mantra of consumer choice goes hand-in-hand with a sense of responsibility that links to wider notions of privilege, which is embedded in the Northern (consumers)/Southern (producers) dichotomy and a retreat from the inequalities emphasised by class politics. Global responsibility is here predicated upon a subject position that broadly equates to a ubiquitous middle class consumer.

In the South, the focus on consumer protection emphasises consumption as a site for collective politics in ways which simultaneously transcend class distinctions whilst speaking most directly to the vulnerability of poor consumers. Here the connections between consumption, privilege and responsibility remain unspoken, unexamined and largely inadmissible. One cannot speak of privilege and responsibility in the face of overwhelmingly poverty in the Global South. Furthermore, extremes of conspicuous consumption have long been associated in these societies with an irresponsible and widely assumed-to-be corrupt category of 'super-rich'. The rise of the new middle classes in the South, however, means that questions of consumption, privilege and responsibility can no longer be ducked. Those questions are inseparable from class politics and can be anticipated to be strongly mediated by the historical specificities of middle class formation, durability and expansion, by complex relationships between class and modernity, lifestyle aspirations, and educational attainment, and by the realities of southern labour markets for the middle classes. Indeed, for

several commentators on the new middle classes of the South, it is their structural fragility and the phenomenon of highly educated unemployment, connected in turn to economic liberalisation policies from the 1990s, that is emphasised (e.g. Fernandes, 2000; Jeffrey et al. 2008; Mapril, 2014). This makes any sense of privilege at best provisional, if not uncertain. Moreover, in a situation in which consumer politics have been forged around safety and protection, and where responsibility has been attached to the state and the agents of civil society, an open question is the degree to which responsibility can be attached to individual, and inevitably middle class, consumers.

That question of the potential to attach responsibility to the Southern middle class sits at the heart of any attempt to make space for ethical consumption in the South. Whereas ethical interventions in the Global North 'encourage (people) to recognise themselves as bearing certain types of global obligation by virtue of their position as consumers' (Barnett et al. 2011 p 13), the challenge in displacing such arguments South is that here the consumer is not as privileged as their counterpart in North America or Northern Europe. On all sorts of comparators, be that current levels of expenditure, environmental footprint or a history as consumers, Southern consumers are unlikely to accept an account which positions responsibility for global inequalities as a responsibility equally shared across global consumers (see Consumers International, 2010b, p 48). As such, they are a considerable distance from being able to self-identify with Young's (2004) account, which underpins much thinking about ethical consumption as a form of political consumption.

To move beyond this impasse we turn to what, for us, is the force of Barnett et al.'s argument, which is that this is not just a conceptual argument but also one with political bite. If consumption and the consumer are as much interests spoken of and mobilised as they are everyday practices then it should be possible for Southern consumption to become a surface of mobilisation for ethical consumption. Moreover, if Barnett et al.'s analysis is to have any political purchase, it is surely to press the importance of organisations doing politics in ways which bring into being the figure of the ethical consumer in public debate in the South, not as an absence but as a putative presence. In such

a way, the rapidly expanding millions of middle class consumers in the South might be admitted into debate about global responsibility, not as a problem but as a possibility. It is these possibilities that we are interested in opening up here.

We begin in Section 3 by examining how conditions for consumer responsibilities might be established, in ways which recognise the differentiated responsibilities of Southern consumers. In Young's account of shifting from responsibility grounded in blame to a responsibility shared, the key manoeuvre is not to blame consumers at the individual level for global inequities but to admit a shared responsibility for the collective outcomes of everyday acts. For Northern consumers, this has been accomplished through defetishising the commodity chain and developing narratives of care-at-a-distance which are made co-present in everyday acts, particularly shopping. If responsibility is potentially to be attached to consumers in the South, similar tactics need to be adopted. Specifically, ethicality needs to be decoupled from its exclusive attachment to consumer goods produced for the global export market. Instead, for Southern consumption to become a surface of mobilisation, campaigners need to focus on Southern brands and Southern production, paying particular attention to the conditions of production that pertain here. These are the brands which research is showing to be purchased by the vast majority of Southern consumers. In such a way inequities in conditions of production within the South might be brought into view. Equally, campaigners might challenge the separation between export production for consumers in the Global North and production for consumers in the markets of the South. The potential to work from Southern retail brands and their supply chains, to link production for global brands with that for domestic and international markets across the South, is considerable. In such ways, the possibility of entangling Southern consumers in differentiated positions of global responsibility is established. In the following section we consider

these possibilities in Bangladesh. Our starting point is the Rana Plaza disaster, the current poster child for global debate on ethical consumption.⁵

3: Made in Bangladesh: Rana Plaza and the politics of responsibility

The collapse of the Rana Plaza building in Savar municipality, Dhaka on 24 April 2013 shocked and reverberated around the world. Images of the eight-storey building falling like a pack of cards, with some 5000 garment workers, the majority of them women, trapped inside became a metaphor for Made in Bangladesh. As the count of dead and missing persons rose, the horror of the event intensified: in total 2438 people were rescued but 1131 people died; 1115 bodies were recovered, of which only 840 were identifiable. Since the disaster, Rana Plaza has become *the* figure through which a global politics of responsibility in relation to clothing consumption is drawn. Activists across the Global North have sought to bind Northern consumers to the working lives, and deaths, of poor Bangladeshi garment workers, and to use Rana Plaza to re-pose questions about the possibilities for ethical, as well as slower and sustainable, fashion.

Perhaps the most provocative of responses is this

<http://www.dhakatribune.com/weekend/2014/mar/13/undressing-american-apparel-ad>. Featuring in Vice Magazine in March 2014 and shot in line with the hyper-sexualised, controversy-courting campaigns associated with American Apparel, the image is of a Dhaka-born, Los Angeles-based, young Bangladeshi woman working as a merchandiser and model for the company. It is an overt challenge to cultural norms in a majority Muslim state and vulnerable to feminist critiques of the objectification, commodification and exoticisation of Asian women. In its finer details, however, the image is about ethical consumption. The American Apparel jeans sold by the image are manufactured in the US, by women paid a fair wage and with access to basic rights and benefits. Ethically-produced products are here appropriated as fashionable, sexy. The image invites

⁵ The paper draws on the English-language and Bengali-language press in Bangladesh (including the Daily Star, Daily Prothom-alo, bdnews24), international media (Al Jazeera, BBC, CNN, Guardian, New York Times), on activist blogs and NGO reports (see list of websites consulted).

comparison with the unethical fashion goods made in Bangladesh for global export markets, whose conditions of production, through Rana Plaza, have been laid bare for the world to see. In this way, a political question is posed by this image to Bangladeshi garment manufacture; how long can it persist with conditions of production that the Global North sees as unethical?

One consequence of Rana Plaza's framing as ethical consumption's current poster child, then, is that it has reinvigorated a North-South debate about the global fashion industry. Indeed, the prominent narrative of the disaster in the global media connects the garments being produced by the five factories within the building to major retail brands in the Global North (e.g. Tesco, Walmart, Primark), and to cheap fast fashion. This reading is repeated in films such as *The Shirt On Your Back*, made to coincide with the first anniversary of Rana Plaza. Such accounts read the disaster primarily as an effect of North-South inequities in the value chains of cheap fast fashion. Northern consumers' insatiable demand for cheap fashion, retailers and buyers squeezing the last drop of value out of Southern manufacturers, Bangladesh's garment factories with production capacity stretched to maximum and beyond to fill orders, and the country's 'race to the bottom' approach to attracting global business, in which cheap labour is seen as the primary means to competitive advantage, all combine to locate Rana Plaza within a classic North-South explanatory framing. Correspondingly, in terms of the politics of responsibility that emerge from such accounts, it is retailers and consumers of the Global North on whom the emphasis falls, with the most interesting development being the extension of retailer responsibility beyond labour rights to include factories as buildings, and their compliance with building codes. Of more interest to us here, however, is how the event of Rana Plaza has reverberated within Bangladesh, and what this might have to say about a politics of consumer responsibility there.

Within Bangladesh, Rana Plaza circulates as three primary discourses. The first, visible most prominently in the immediacy of the collapse, is a failure of emergency governance. Transparent deficiencies in how state agencies responded to the disaster led to voluntary civilian interventions.

Reports highlight people from Savar spending days searching the rubble with little more than their bare hands. They speak of volunteers performing amputations with hacksaws, without anaesthetic, on trapped workers; of volunteers taking corpses by rickshaw to a makeshift morgue; of going against the authorities in cleaning dead bodies, in order to enable families to identify their dead; and of people giving money to help the rescued. Reports state this equated to never-seen-before examples of goodness and humanity in Bangladesh. They suggest a sense of citizenship as civic responsibility in the absence of, and to critique the failure in, state responsibility.

Secondly, for activist organisations such as Odhikar campaigning for labour, social justice and human rights in Bangladesh, Rana Plaza continues to be positioned in wider North-South inequalities and acts as a rallying point for labour protests. However, it is also located in wider domestic politics. Critical here is a responsibility that seeks accountability at the same time as apportioning liability and blame. Investigative research exposed the corruption behind Sohel Rana's acquisition of the building that came to be known as Rana Plaza. It showed the culpability of local officials, building inspectors and local politicians in Savar Municipality, who authorised, and then turned the blind eye to, the addition of several storeys to the Rana Plaza building; the shoddy construction techniques that led to the structural failure of the building; and the limited levels of compensation received by the families of the dead. In this way Rana Plaza has been mobilised by activists to expose the corruption and lack of accountability in domestic politics, and to demand justice for those affected. It has become an event to which legal responsibilities have been attached.

A third means by which Rana Plaza circulates within Bangladesh emerged after the collapse, and cohered in first year anniversary commemorative events. Creative and performance artists organised various interventions, taking their intellectual cues from the postcolonial invocation to speak on behalf of the subaltern, in this case poor garment workers. A five day event (22 – 26 April 2014) organised by Pathshala, a Left-leaning collective, comprising exhibitions of photography, music, talks and performance art, is the clearest example. It sought to 'pay homage to the fallen

souls [...] who were killed [...] through performance art reflecting the sorrow of the deprived [...] attempts to leave a lasting mark on our collective psyche' (Figure 1).

Figure 1 about here

Within Bangladesh, then, Rana Plaza is an event framed by two meta-narratives. The first is the familiar one for audiences in the Global North, of North-South inequalities which demand responsibility of Northern retailers and consumers. The second – and much more prominent in Bangladesh itself – is a politics of responsibility grounded in collective citizenship, which defines itself against the failings of the state, government and municipal authorities. In Bangladesh, Rana Plaza has become a means to demand a new politics of accountability and new forms of social justice.

As important for the concerns of this paper, however, is the striking (to Northern eyes) absence: neither the figure of the ethical consumer, nor ethical consumption more broadly, features anywhere in this debate in Bangladesh. There is a disconnect between, on the one hand, Rana Plaza and the wider politics of labour injustices for poor garment workers this has instilled and, on the other, burgeoning levels of clothing consumption by the Bangladeshi middle classes (see Section 1). Stated more strongly, as consumers Bangladesh's middle classes bear no responsibility. That this is so can be explained as the combined effect of responsibility's continued attachment to the Northern consumer, of Rana Plaza's framing through North-South consumer politics, and of a Bangladesh consumer politics focused on rights, particularly the safety of ingested products and the prices of staples (Section 2).⁶ But, if space is to be made for debates on ethical consumption within

⁶ The Consumer Association of Bangladesh (CAB, founded 1978) is an NGO affiliated to Consumers International (CI). In the 1990s, Rahman (1994) reported it still in its nascent stages, notwithstanding campaigns in the 1980s around core CI issues. More recently, the Consumer Rights Protection Act (2009) was followed by a UNIDO/EU/CI/Norad Bangladesh Quality Support Project (2008 – 2010), which sought to enhance the market surveillance and research capacities of the CAB and to review the state of consumer protection in Bangladesh in light of concerns over the adequacies of the 2009 Act (Rahman et al. 2010). This project sought to strengthen the regulatory regime of consumer protection in Bangladesh (Consumer International, 2010a, 2010b). At the same time as showing how consumer protection in Bangladesh has been

Bangladesh, then ways surely need to be found of entangling Bangladesh's middle classes as consumers, and not just citizens, in the event of Rana Plaza and of creating the conditions in which responsibility can potentially be attached to these middle class consumers? As we now show, there are possibilities for such intervention.

Of critical importance here are a number of Bangladeshi retail brands which market their fashion goods as of export quality, notably Yellow, Trendz and Textmart. Selling both men's and women's clothing, these brands sell either a combination of western fashion and Asian/Western fusion clothing (Yellow) or a combination of Asian/Western fusion and traditional/modern style (Trendz, Textmart) (Figure 2).

Figure 2 about here

All three brands connect to major Bangladeshi textile groups, all vertically integrated, spanning yarn, fabric production and garment manufacture, but which also export to suppliers and retailers in the Global North. The significance of these brands is they challenge the separation drawn between production for the export and domestic markets. Thus, Yellow is the retail brand of Beximco (a leading Bangladeshi textile producer), whose clients include Zara, Macy's and Calvin Klein; Trendz is the retail brand of Babylon Group, which is a supplier for Tesco, Walmart, and New Look amongst others; and Textmart is part of the Giant Group, which under the name of Mavis Garments Ltd is a supplier for Walmart. When domestic retail brands manufacture and market garments as Western style and export quality, then the question raised is just how distinct domestic and export production runs and supply chains actually are. Answering that question and unveiling the conditions of production in garment factories producing for the domestic market would seem a major opportunity for campaign groups to engender debate on ethical consumption in Bangladesh. It would open up to scrutiny supply chains currently blurred by representations that keep export and

mobilised as a site of intervention for international agencies, this work confirms the focus for political consumption in Bangladesh remains consumer rights.

domestic manufacture apart and would begin to constitute a surface of mobilisation of Southern retail brands and the domestic apparel industry. It would also mobilise the figure of the ethical consumer as a subject position in the South. In such a way Bangladesh's middle class consumers might begin to see themselves not only as consumers whose rights need protection but also as consumers with responsibilities; even as consumers whose clothing consumption is not as distinct from Rana Plaza as global and domestic narratives currently imply.

Notwithstanding the potential in these possibilities, we end this section with a note of caution. The general tactic of making Southern consumption political is an extension of that applied in the Global North. There is no guarantee that displacement South will result in consumer responsibility being recognised. To accept a subject position of responsibility requires an acceptance of relative privilege, whilst to make Southern consumption political will require reworking care-at-a-distance for the Southern consumer, for whom care would be constituted in geographical proximity, but at a social distance. In the case of Bangladesh, these are potentially troublesome points. Here, the structural insecurities felt by the middle classes (Section 1) are far from conducive to cementing notions of privilege which work as a precondition for responsibility to be acknowledged and acted upon. Moreover, the importance of social distance as a potential stumbling block is not to be underestimated. Rozario's (2006) work has shown poor garment workers are frequently seen by the middle classes as beneficiaries of economic liberalisation in Bangladesh and as the very group whom the middle classes wish to differentiate themselves from. Clothing consumption is just one means by which this distinction is performed. So, to constitute care relations for and about poor garment workers producing clothes for the domestic market (as opposed to export markets) would be to unsettle the Bangladeshi middle classes' self-perception. It would require paying more for clothing to enable better wages and working conditions for the very group that for the middle classes is perhaps most important to keep at a distance. In such circumstances the potential for responsibility to be refused is clear.

It is against this backdrop that we turn in the following section to examine the possibilities afforded by a very different model of ethical consumption: mainstreaming. Staying with Bangladesh, we introduce what is perhaps one of the most developed instances of mainstreamed ethical consumption in the South.

4: Selling ethicality in the South: the case of Aarong, Bangladesh

In this section we focus on Fair Trade and ethical trade in Bangladesh, shifting this from its current emphasis on producers (le Mare, 2012a) to its interface with Bangladesh's middle class consumers. Selling Bangladeshi-produced, often Fair Trade-certified, handicraft goods in the domestic market in Bangladesh is exemplified by the retail brands Aarong, Deshi Dosh and Joyeeta. All three brands underscore le Mare's (2012a) depiction of fair trade in Bangladesh as characterised by a synergy of traditional cultures and emergent business practices with fair trade principles, if not necessarily Fair Trade accreditation.⁷ Of the three, Aarong is the most significant retail brand in Bangladesh (Islam et al., 2014), and of wider importance for furthering debate on ethical consumption in the South.

Aarong (literal meaning, 'village fair') was certified as a Fair Trade Organisation in 2007, yet is also one of the iconic retail brands in Bangladesh. It has a small presence outside the country, with products sold through fair trade organisations in the global North. However, 95% of its market is domestic. Ten department stores are spread across the major cities (Dhaka, Chittagong, Sylhet and Khulna) and reported business turnover gives year-on-year averages of over 20% growth from the mid 2000s. Aarong's success rests on quality products that, whilst modern, link strongly to ethnic heritage, design and style (Figures 3 & 4). Spanning clothing, including a leading-edge youth fashion-fusion brand (Taaga), furniture and soft furnishings, home-ware, gifts, children's toys, jewellery, and crafts, Aarong stores sell their consumers convenience with style, uniqueness and value (Figure 5). They allow middle class consumers to narrate themselves as discerning, sophisticated, modern,

⁷ For example, Joyeeta - developed by the Ministry of Women and Children - seeks to give 16000 Women's Associations direct access to urban markets (Daily Star, 17 January 2014).

urban, cool and as both Bangladeshi and Bengali.⁸ Yet, in spite of surface appearances, Aarong is no ordinary retail brand: it is the flagship retail brand developed by the Bangladeshi international NGO BRAC.

Figures 3, 4 & 5 about here

Founded immediately post the Liberation War, BRAC pioneered the social development model of women's empowerment and participation within Bangladesh (le Mare, 2012b). Now, through the development of an extensive business portfolio, which includes poultry and dairy, banking and higher education, BRAC is the exemplar of 'poverty enterprise' in Bangladesh and epitomises the corporate NGO (White, 1999; Mannan, 2009). Whilst some accounts position it as a learning organisation, characterised by ceaseless innovation (Smillie, 2009), critical scholarship positions BRAC as a 'shadow state' (Karim, 2010) emblematic of neoliberal development; and through its programme of expansion in the South, as a key instance of the 'South-South' internationalisation of the corporate NGO model (Hossein & Sengupta, 2009). None of this work, however, dwells on the Aarong-BRAC relation. We suggest this is because it is located in development paradigms, but the effect is considerable; the oversight is to miss the connection to debates on ethical consumption. Combined with the North-South imaginary that frames thinking about ethical consumption, the result has been to overlook decades of ethical consumption in the South.

The Aarong-BRAC connection is longstanding, going back to the early days of the NGO in post-Liberation Bangladesh. Rather than relying exclusively on export markets delivered via the fair trade model, BRAC simultaneously developed a vertically integrated value chain connecting primary agricultural and handicraft producers to retail outlets and consumers in the major cities of Bangladesh. The initial forays came in 1978. A joint partnership between BRAC and the Mennonite Central Committee linked handicraft production to the Ten Thousand Villages programme,

⁸ Aarong is also the store to which foreign visitors are directed to purchase souvenirs, as well as the brand which is most readily associated with cultural heritage within the Bangladeshi middle class diaspora.

connecting artisanal producers and their products to Northern consumers. At the same time, BRAC/Mennonite set up a retail outlet in Dhaka: Aarong. This became the means to selling rural handicrafts and artisanal products in the domestic market. A dual export (fair trade)/domestic model existed through the 1980s, but by the 1990s the Aarong brand was being consolidated as a major retail and fashion brand in Bangladesh, and as 'a one stop shop' (i.e. department store) for Bangladesh's emerging educated middle class. This has firmed up since the mid-2000s. The brand has become readily identified with both traditional/modern fashion in clothing and home interiors as well as *the* place to buy *deshi* (local) handicraft goods. Yet the Fair Trade connection is nowhere in sight inside Aarong's stores.

Aarong's supply chain comprises a dense network, like BRAC's poultry and dairy business (Karim, 2010). The NGO's literature describes this as encompassing over 1600 artisanal groups, and over 65000 artisans in 2000 villages in rural Bangladesh; 85% of whom are women. Approximately 40000 women work in 13 Aarong production centres and a further 653 smaller centres (Figure 6).

Figure 6 about here

Another 25000 independent cooperatives and artisans, including potters, basket weavers, silk and handloom weavers, wood carvers, leather and jute workers, and jewellers, also sell their products through the network. BRAC suggests that it has captured for the domestic market over 75% of the cotton produced by the main cotton growing area of Bangladesh (Madhaba) and over 70% of the silk grown in Maidaha. Such is the symbiosis between Aarong and handloom production that fabric production in areas such as Chapai Nawabganj and Norshindi is totally dependent upon the brand.

In this way BRAC has retained for the South the value in the value chain, by linking this to a retail chain which relies on the purchasing power of domestic middle class consumers. Through its library of indigenous design motifs, BRAC also acts as the custodian and curator of Bengali design and craft, including Nakshi Kantha (embroidery), thereby ensuring that the value in these designs is neither

lost to the Bangladeshi economy nor lost to BRAC through widespread problems associated with copyright infringement (ECOTA, 2005 cited in le Mare, 2012). It also ensures BRAC retains the rights to the commodification of Bengali identity. Through Aarong BRAC has commercialised Bengali identity; its products sell to the Bangladeshi middle classes a cultural and political identity that is simultaneously Bengali and Bangladeshi.

Aarong is the exemplar case of mainstreaming ethical consumption in Bangladesh. Its significance to debate on ethical consumption is hard to overstate, for at least three reasons. First, it shows that ethical consumption exists in the Global South, not as ethical consumption per se but as ordinary consumption whose effect is ethical. Bangladesh's middle class consumers are not buying Aarong's goods because they are a means to acting ethically, but because these ethically-produced goods narrate a Bourdieu-ian social self and a cultural identity that is closely interwoven with ethnic and national identity. It is design, style and uniqueness that matters here, not ethicality. But, as Aarong's success shows, when sold like this, ethicality certainly sells in the South, making ethical consumption a fact even as it shows the figure of the ethical consumer in Bangladesh currently to be a fiction.

Second, the Aarong model of mainstreaming is located in a retail brand, not just products, and in a NGO-retail brand at that. This shifts debate about mainstreaming away from its current primary focus on singular commodities and its effects on producers (Section 2) and towards the retail brand (Hughes et al. 2013). Critically it shifts attention to Southern retail brands and to the heterogeneity of retail capital in the South. The significance of Aarong here is that this is upgrading ethical value in the South, achieved by a Southern NGO through its own retail brand. Ethical value is neither solely to be realised through products sold through export markets that connect to consumers in the Global North nor value that is necessarily lost to the South: short, vertically integrated ethical supply chains connecting producers with consumers in the South are possible. Although there are contingencies which clearly matter here, it surely is not the case that Aarong is the only example of upgrading ethicality in the South? Rather, we suggest, it is lines of sight that continue to frame ethicality

through a Northern-centric rather than within-South or South-South lens, and which continue to frame rural development as disconnected from consumption in the South, that allow retail brands such as Aarong to remain out of sight to wider debate.

Third, and finally, Aarong is a form of ethical consumption minus consumer responsibility. Whilst Bangladeshi consumers certainly know Aarong connects with BRAC, air-conditioned department stores selling glamour, style and cultural/ethnic heritage make those connections absent. There is no 'doing the right thing' moralising involved in shopping in Aarong. Rather, Aarong allows its consumers to exercise ethicality by allowing them to be consumers. It provides another affirmation of Miller's (2001) arguments about the poverty of morality. Like their counterparts in the Global North, Aarong's middle class consumers are exercising care-at-a-distance in making these purchases, but as an effect of consuming for the people that matter most to them, their immediate families, friends and themselves. They certainly are not consuming these goods to demonstrate their care for the socially and geographically distant rural others who produce these goods. Yet, critically, in buying Aarong goods (Taaga clothes, say, rather than clothing from Yellow, Trendz or Textmart) these consumers are exercising a wider care. The conjuncture of ethnicity and nationality offered by Aarong marks a form of ethical consumption located in pride in national and ethnic identities, and the valorisation of home-produced, indigenous goods. If there is a consumer responsibility here it is that of middle class Bangladeshis to buy (quality) Bangladesh. More care-about-home than care-at-a-distance, this signals that to admit the South into debate about ethical consumption will require ethical consumption to be re-imagined. We close the paper by reflecting more widely on these findings.

5: Conclusion

In this paper we have argued that the current formulation of ethical consumption through North-South framings makes no space for consumers in the Global South, and that the rise of millions of middle class consumers in the South makes such a position untenable. Working at the interface of

cultural, economic and development work in human geography and related disciplines, we have unsettled understandings of ethical consumption by working from the South, specifically Bangladesh. Starting from Barnett et al.'s (2011) framework, in which ethical consumption is not a property of individual consumers but rather a surface for mobilisation, we have shown the conceptual and political possibilities for thinking ethical consumption South. Working from the possibilities afforded by Southern retail brands, we have shown how Southern consumer politics might move beyond its current exclusive focus on consumer rights to make space for a politics of consumer responsibility that inevitably will be middle class. At the same time, in theorising from Bangladesh we have shown that ethical consumption is not, as is assumed, an absence but rather already an effect of ethicality's mainstreaming as a retail brand, in this instance by a corporate NGO. This is not as the literature on either ethical trade or ethical consumption understands this. As such, it indicates the wider imperative of the paper, to think ethical consumption not from the conceptual framings of the North but rather from the South.

The immediate implications of these findings for practitioner and academic debate on ethical consumption are considerable. For practitioners, there is a clear and pressing opportunity to constitute ethical consumption in the South as a site for intervention in consumer politics. Without this the middle classes of the South will become increasingly vulnerable to charges of reckless and careless consumption, be that in relation to social injustices or the future of the planet. Consumer campaign organisations in the South might therefore broaden their focus from an exclusive concern with consumer rights to include responsibilities alongside rights. As part of this, the figure of the ethical consumer in the South needs to be claimed, as a position to speak from and on behalf of in the public sphere. There are at least two ways in which this can be done. First, there is work to be done on unveiling the conditions of production of domestic and international brands in the South. Second, there is considerable mileage in publicising the ethical mainstreaming that already exists in the South. Whilst the latter would show that ethical consumption is alive and well in the South, and act as a vital counter to a global politics that currently attributes the moral high ground in consumer

politics to the retailers and consumers of the Global North, the former would create the conditions for a Southern responsibility to be produced.

In terms of furthering academic debate, three points seem essential. First, it is imperative to deepen research on ethical consumption in the South, such that its contours can be more clearly established. In particular, there is a need for research to recognise that the consumers of the South are not located exclusively in the BRICS. Further, differences in the form of retail capital across the South need to be acknowledged, along with the potential to shape ethical consumption. Unlike some of the BRICS economies, the retail landscape of Bangladesh, for example, is characterised currently by relatively few global retail brands, by international (Southern) retail brands and by Bangladeshi brands. This is beginning to change as global retail capital starts to recognise the dynamism of the Bangladeshi market, but retail capital for the present remains primarily domestic, with NGO-retailing and social entrepreneurship also strong presences. Alongside this, there is still a multitude of market (bazaar) trading and the stall or shop continues to be a means to entry-level entrepreneurship. This distinctive retail landscape is varyingly open to different versions of ethical consumption. We suggest, however, that it is in the emerging economies of the South, particularly those like Bangladesh with a strong NGO sector, and where the corporate NGO is a major force, that the strongest evidence for upgrading ethical value is likely to be found.

Second, it is important to interface research on ethical consumption with the emergent consumer cultures of the South and their connection to the dynamics of middle class formation and labour market position. As a general point, the heterogeneity of the middle classes across the South will offer different potential for, and openness to, an emerging politics of global consumer responsibility. In the case of Bangladesh, we suggest that heterogeneity might be anticipated to connect with different degrees of acceptance of the figure of the ethical consumer. Further, the conjuncture of emergent consumer cultures, in which status and distinction are at a premium, with the insecurities and uncertainties felt by this middle class in response to economic liberalisation policies, is

potentially troublesome for ethical consumption. In conditions where privilege is uncertain, responsibility may well be refused. Documenting middle class uncertainties therefore is important. So too is understanding how they might relate to patterns and practices of consumption, for if having stuff works to secure identity more widely across the South then it is perhaps the potential in consumers exercising ethicality not through any invocation to a wider, moral responsibility but through doing consumption ordinarily that is the most fruitful terrain on which ethical consumption might work. There will be no substitute here for a range of country-specific studies.

Third, and finally, there is a need to reconfigure the Northern-centric spatial imaginary that provides the current frame for conceptualising ethical consumption. Ethical consumption is not limited to the care-at-a-distance that connects rich, Northern consumers and poor, Southern producers. Others have made the same argument when highlighting the connections of ethicality to locally-produced goods and the potency of the near-to-home in underpinning moves towards slower, sustainable consumption. Research on alternative food networks, farmers' markets and organic farming all makes this point. However, in focusing exclusively on Northern consumers such work continues to locate consumption within a Northern-centric global imaginary. Recognising both the actualities of ethical consumption in the South, as well as its possibilities, requires going beyond this. In its Southern form, as we have shown, although the objects of care remain poor Southern producers, the subject of ethical consumption is the Southern (middle class) consumer. This new subject sits at the heart of reconfiguring the spatial imaginary of ethical consumption and is critical to revising a global politics of consumer responsibility. This subject has yet to fully identify as a global consumer and, for the most part, their purchasing power remains confined primarily to domestic and Southern international brands. As such, for this subject, care relations will necessarily be more geographically compressed than those that have been constituted for the global consumers of the North. They will be enacted within-South, on South-South lines and also within country.

Admitting the subject position of the Southern consumer and geographically-compressed forms of care relations into conceptualisation of ethical consumption forces the Northern-centric spatial imaginary founded on the subject position of the Northern consumer to give way. This is not a case of simple substitution, replacing a Northern consumer with a Southern counterpart. Instead, what matters to forging a revised global politics of consumer responsibility is a twin subject position, of Northern *and* Southern consumers. That twin subject position is critical to opening up the possibility of differentiated positions of consumer responsibility in global consumption. Underpinning it is a spatiality that is simultaneously global, international and local, that is, North-South, South-South, within-North and within-South. Correspondingly, in this reconfigured ethical consumption, articulations of the spatialities of care relations will need to shift from care-at-a-distance to encompass a proximity/distance that is social and geographical as well as spatial. What matters here is not just care for and about far-away others but care for and about distant proximates. This is care in geographical proximity, at a social distance and in relations of social distinction. Such a geographically bounded and differentiated sense of responsibility, in relations of partial, fragmented (dis)connection, makes space for the difference that is the Southern consumer within a broader global politics of consumption.

The paper has shown what this new imaginary might begin to look like, working with and from Bangladesh to disrupt prevailing representations of that country. Here the political potential in unveiling domestic retail clothing brands highlights care of distant proximates, centred on relatively affluent urban, middle class consumers and poor, urban garment workers. At the same time, ethicality's mainstreaming has established nationally-bounded relations of care-at-a-distance, located in the urban (middle class) – rural (poor) distinction, whilst promoting care-close-to-home through the purchase of goods that are bearers of ethnic and national identity. All this co-exists with the country's position in global manufacture, which homogenises Bangladesh as an object of care-at-a-distance. The resulting imaginary is something altogether more complex, multiple and potentially contradictory than the current global spatial imaginary of Bangladesh allows for, but it is this terrain

on which a new global politics of consumer responsibility needs to be forged. It is in this space that the differentiated positions of privilege and responsibility that go with an ethical consumption multiple will be opened-up.

Acknowledgements

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Acknowledgements

Particular thanks are due to Colin McFarlane for comments on earlier versions of this paper and to participants at the Ethical Consumption and the Globalizing Middle Classes Workshop (Durham University, 8-9 July 2014); to Alex Hughes, Mike Crang and three anonymous referees for their generous responses and suggestions on the submitted version. Thanks also to Tanvir Murad Topu and Munem Wasif, Pathshala: South Asian Media Institute, Mifta Jannat Chowdhury and Tanvir Hossain, BRAC Communication Team for permission to reproduce images.

Highlights

1. The paper reworks accounts of ethical consumption to admit the South.
2. It develops a Southern politics of responsibility grounded in distant proximities.
3. Ethical consumption exists in Bangladesh, as consumption with ethical effects.